

The Gee-Whiz Details Behind the Big Story

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By Les Whitten

The repulsive truth about television that the movie "Network" told us by hyperbole is explored less savagely but more accurately by two men who ought to know—CBS's Marvin Kalb and ABC's Ted Koppel.

That is: With rare exceptions, given the choice between honesty and half-truth, courage and cowardice, quality and trash, substance and appearance, television will opt for the baser, if its own self-interest is even vaguely at stakes.

How often, knowing Roger Mudd, Dan Rather, Dan Schorr, Cassie Mackin, Brit Hume and others with that sense of outrage which distinguishes truly fine crusading reporters, have I

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IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST.
By Marvin Kalb and Ted Koppel

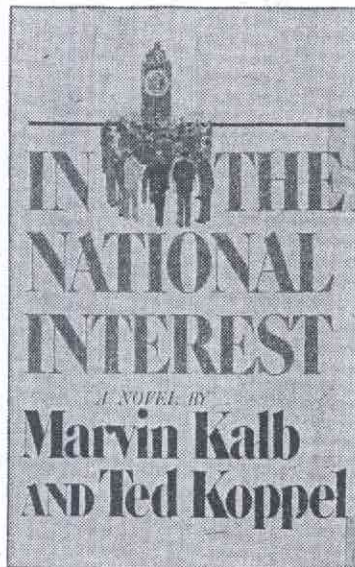
Simon & Schuster. 371 pp. \$10

wondered how they stand (in Schorr's case, stood) the reek of cravenness in their industry.

That question, though it take a long time to get to, is central to this not-terribly-deep, commercial and excellent novel about a TV foreign correspondent who lives for the Big Story.

Darius Kane of "National News Service" (read it "Major Network" despite some hokey camouflage) is accompanying a Kissinger-like Secretary of State of his shuttle diplomacy to head off a Mideast war.

The book gets off to a bustling start with the kidnapping of the Secretary of State's wife by Arab militants, and the pace never slows much. It flavorfully moves through assassinations, chase scenes, White House backbiting, secret agency—all standard meat in the Washington fiction stewpot, but in this case sauced with three-and-a-half-star pungency by two veteran coders.



Darius Kane is everywhere on the story: confiding with the Secretary of State, blackmailing a crucial fact from a corrupt magazine editor, conning a Swiss financial official, slurping food and drink in the Mideast's most recherche bars.

The gee-whiz details of news-collecting are, in fact, quite precise. One does occasionally lay \$20 on a hotel operator to make sure one's overseas calls are handled before the competition's; a friendly Secret Service man (risking his job) sometimes does confirm a dynamite story with a nod so slight it looks like a lowering of the chin; pet reporters do fawn intimate if self-serving exclusives from Presidents and other Pooh Bahs.

For print newsmen who have wondered how the highly paid TV types earn their keep on these junkets and, more importantly, for watchers of the evening news, there are pages of

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superb description on how foreign corresponding really works. The 90 seconds one sees on TV are, behind the scenes, an agony of filming, editing, writing, performing, voiceovering, satellite requesting and co-worker villifying by transoceanic telephone.

And if "In the National Interest" blips out totally in a half-dozen spots, it does so only once disastrously. That is when Kane mawkishly commences seduction of a svelte CIA agent named Katherine Chandler (am I imagining things about the choice of that name?). The dialogue there would stick retchingly in the craw of a Brenda Starr inamorato.

Through it all, Darius Kane grows on us. No more than a handsome face on the tube at first, he rounds out to a hard-working, more than a little self-important, loyal, funny, brave newsman who devotedly cares about chasing down the truth.

He cares, not so much from responsibility to his listeners—actually he's a little short on conventional First Amendment idealism—but simply be-

cause the truth, remote and fog-clasped, is there. Not to suggest a comparison on literary merit, there is yet in Kane something of E. E. Cummings' conscientious objector, Olaf.

As with Olaf, it sinks into us that resisting compromise, trying to get the news out undefiled, is important not just to Kane, not just to the media, but to the rest of us—indeed to, forgive the archaism, Liberty.

At this point, when we come to admire Kane and to understand that his precious, perishable commodity—news—nourishes our way of existing, this book soars up and beyond any recent Washington novel I have read. If only for those last few brief pages.

For, as we watch appalled while Kane is ground to bits by his network, his editor, his government, even his girl, all for the sake of a lovely news story, we see the squalor and the splendor of reporting, and exactly why America can neither be comfortable with it, nor safe without it.

Les Whitten is a syndicated columnist and the author of several novels, most recently "Conflict of Interest."